

# EXCELLENCY

— JOURNAL OF A DIPLOMAT —



**TAN KOON SAN**

# EXCELLENCY

- *Journal of a Diplomat* -

*A record for posterity.*

*Tan Koon San*

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**TAN Koon San**

**TOP**

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# Preface

*T*his is a book written for pleasure and to reminisce, to revel and to share, not my past, (it has passed) but my memory, while it still remains. I have tried to recall only those moments and observations that have influenced my perception of life and my understanding of the countries and peoples I came in contact with, rather than recording all experiences of my life in diplomacy. It is simply my perception of the 'joy' and satisfaction that can be derived from a career in diplomacy. I have deliberately avoided most matters that are derogatory to the country or people I came across. These would not be a joy to recollect.

I have enjoyed every moment of my near three decades in diplomacy and I have met, dealt with, and befriended a wide spectrum of people from all the five continents. This exposure has led me to conclude that, by and large, patriotism is a far more important quality for diplomacy than intelligence or, for that matter, might and power. Diplomacy is about nationhood, pursuing the goals of the nation and keeping constant vigil over the national interests - there can be no lapses. It is said that when men stop talking they start fighting; and when diplomacy fails war begins. The essence is maintaining the peace by averting war!

I started writing this book on the spur of the moment, on 13<sup>th</sup> November 1998; sparked off by a casual remark from my wife to write something not taxing for her to read. My daughter was ecstatic when she learned of my endeavour. Her interests over what I had done with part of my life would be accommodated.

When the first draft was completed, on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1999, I intimated to some friends why I had been hibernating from society, and golfing, for two months. Many of them expressed encouragement, and some volunteered to proof-read, edit, and act as critics over the draft. I was most encouraged and excited, yet nervous about the actual prospect of publication but after a while too much had been done to abort the idea. Hence I tightened the reins and rode the horse out into the public domain, and all cheered me on.

Truly this task could not have been accomplished without the earnest encouragement and painstaking contribution from a group of friends and well-wishers. Their critical comments and constructive suggestions on the various aspects of literary composition, especially with respect to grammar, structure, presentation and factual accuracy as to dates, events and spelling of names and places, undoubtedly helped to shape the final form of this book. To each and everyone of them who have in some way lent me a helping hand or a willing ear, no word will suffice to express my gratitude. Nonetheless I feel obliged to record my indebtedness to them for their efforts and the sacrifice of their time to assist me along the way.

Foremost amongst them are the following colleagues from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Tan Sri Abdul Rahman Jalal, who aided me in recollecting my earliest days in the Ministry; Datuk Abdullah Ali, whose enthusiastic encouragement spurred me on mid-way through; Datuk Abdul Kadir Mohamed, whose observations on some 'minor' details ensured factual accuracy; Madam Ho May Yong and Madam Rashidah Ramli, who despite the commitments of work and family devoutly prompted me on and readily helped whenever I asked; Dato' Mohamed Yusof Ahmad, who diligently went through my initial draft as if it were his own and gave me profoundly pertinent suggestions; Madam Gloria Cho, whose detailed editing on presentation and language proved invaluable, and her husband Mr. Leong Ah Hin, who, over and above giving me his own helpful comments, sportingly assisted in shuttling the draft between us; Dato' John Tenewi Nuek, who despite a busy schedule readily read through my draft and gave me his candid

assessment; Mr. K. Nadarajah, who served with distinction as Ambassador to Iraq during the 1990/91 Iraq-Kuwait War, willingly shared his joy and frustration as a writer with me; and, Dato' Syed Nurul Zaman, Director of the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations, who surprised me with his speedy review of my book and to whom I owe some of the most profound comments on the substance and presentation of my draft.

I am also deeply grateful to Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen, my former Minister of Foreign Affairs; Tun Dr. Lim Chong Eu, the former Chief Minister of Penang; Mr. Lee Chen Chong (C. C. Lee), a retired Banker and a trusted friend; Dr. Andreas Zobel, Deputy Chief of Mission of the German Embassy in Kuala Lumpur until September 1999; Mr. Bobby Lee Eok Hean, a friend since our days together at the University of Malaya, who I believe, spent some sleepless nights working to improve my sentence structures; Mr. Chung Shui Tett, a retired senior lawyer, who obligingly read through the final text and provided me with some penetrating observations; Dr. Tan Kai Lee, whose coy background comments conveyed through telecommunication from Britain assisted in finding some apt words and phrases; Mr. Lim Kok Peng, a friend who acted as the 'devil's advocate' in re-examining the draft; and Mr. Chan Chee Yong, an architect friend who has a fondness for biographies, was most encouraging when I showed him my original draft. In more ways than one the comments and wisdom imparted to me by these distinguished personalities and friends regarding the contents and orientation broadened my perspective in examining the various issues discussed in the book.

One other person deserves a special mention for the painstaking effort and meticulous attention given to editing and streamlining the various literary shortcomings throughout the time it took me to get the book ready for printing. I owe, and have learned a great deal about what it means to write grammatically proper English from Mr. Lim Seah Eng, my maternal uncle, who was a teacher and a retired Head of Business Studies Department, Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore. His literary assistance in transforming my 'Malish' (Malaysian expression of English) into 'common' English, and the oc-

casional French phrase, went a long way to enhance the clarity of expression in the book.

I would also like to express my deep appreciation to Mr. Liu Cheng Choong, a friend of thirty-five years and Secretary-General of Soka Gakkai Malaysia; Madam Chai Siew Lin of Soka Gakkai Malaysia; Mr. Chew Meng Tatt; Mr. Salman Ahmad, Under-Secretary, Information Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Madam Hamidah Yacob, Secretary to Mr. Salman Ahmad, for their collaboration and help in preparing the text for the publisher and printer. To Haji P. K. Koya Kulty of The Other Press, my publisher, I owe more than gratitude; he was most graciously helpful in every assistance I asked of him. Without their expert knowledge in the technical field of publication my dream of getting this book on to the shelves could not have been realized.

Finally, I owe all that has been achieved in the completion of this book to my daughter, Seok Eng, who with some paternal persuasion had to labour through the copious babble in my very first draft and came up with a 'readable', and hence workable, draft, sacrificing numerous weekends and holidays in the endeavour; and to my wife, Fook Lin, who, apart from sharing her experiences with me, did the 'wrapping up' and spent countless hours fine tuning the subtler points of language and expression in the final stage of the preparation. Indeed this book is as much a record of her years spent in the Foreign Service as it is mine.

But while all the help and assistance rendered to me by everyone is sincerely acknowledged, the final product is solely mine. It is I and I alone who should answer to and be responsible for all the shortcomings, errors and opinions in the book.

Koon San

Kuala Lumpur

1<sup>st</sup> December 1999